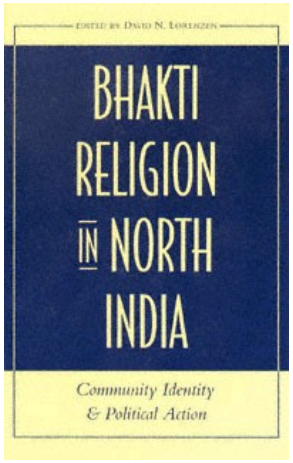

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Bhakti Religion in North India

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Bhakti Religion in North India

Community Identity and Political Action

edited by
David N. Lorenzen

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A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

Diacritics have been used for all Sanskrit and Hindi words *except* the following: (1) names of places, persons and institutions that have "official" English spellings, (2) names of authors, titles and publishers of books and essays in European languages (even when diacritics appear in the original publication), and (3) words that have been absorbed into English (e.g., Krishna, Vishnu, Shiva, yogi, Brahmin, sannyasi, sadhu, Shaivite).

In Hindi words, a final mute a appearing after a single consonant has always been dropped. Other cases of mute a have been left as the authors of the essays prefer (e.g., Tulsidas * or Tulasidas*, Ramanand* or Ramananda*). Some words have been written differently in Hindi and Sanskrit (or pan-Indian) contexts (e.g., Ram* or Rama*).

A clase nasal (*n*, n*, n*, n, m*) has usually been used in place of an *anusvara* (m*)* except before h ands (e.g., *Sankar*, simha**). Pure nasalized vowels *(anunasik*)* are indicated either by an *anusvara* (yaham*)* or by a tilde *(yaha*)*. The following transliterations are also used: ष = sa*. In words without diacritics, these last three are usually written as 'ri,' 'sha,' and 'sha' respectively.

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PREFACE

The essays in this volume all discuss aspects of medieval and modem Hinduism and Sikhism in North India. All are by scholars working in North American universities. Although this is obviously a vast field of study, the number of scholars working in it in North American universities is still relatively small, even compared to the limited number of scholars working in the related fields of classical and Vedic Hinduism, Tantric religion, and South Indian Hinduism. The scholarly balance between these fields, however, does seem to be gradually coming more into line with their actual historical, religious and social importance.

I was particularly pleased, therefore, when El Colegio de México and the National Council for Science and Technology of the Mexican government agreed to sponsor a symposium on Popular Religion and Sociopolitical Dissidence in North India, held in Mexico City in May, 1991. This symposium brought together a dozen senior scholars working on this field in American, Canadian and Mexican universities, as well as several younger scholars and graduate students. Many of the essays in this book grew out of the papers and discussions of this symposium.

Given the varied nature of the research projects of the scholars working in this field in North America, the topics discussed in this book are necessarily varied. All the essays do, however, address the basic problems of the formation of socioreligious identity and difference in North India and of the nature of the ensuing conflicts between Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims that are daily tearing Indian society apart. As a result, the post-independence Indian state has been forced to resort to ever more desperate efforts to save its administrative structure and territorial unity. Insofar as these efforts have led to systematic abuses of human rights by all sides in the conflicts, including the police and armed forces charged with protecting those rights, it is obvious

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that a fundamental rethinking of the situation and courageous new political decisions are urgently needed.

My thanks for help in putting together this volume are owed first and foremost to the authors of the essays, who wrote and revised their texts with care and punctuality. Also helpful were many of the comments in the anonymous readers' reports solicited by State University of New York Press. My own essays also benefited from critical comments from various colleagues, especially Susana Devalle, John Hawley and Harjot Oberoi. My wife, Barbara Martiny, graciously gave up time from her own professional work at several critical junctures to give me extra time to work on the project.

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How happens it then, said PHILO, *if [religion] be so salutary to society, that all history abounds so much with accounts of its pernicious consequences on public affairs? Factions, civil wars, persecutions, subversions of government, oppression, slavery; these are the dismal consequences which always attend its prevalency over the minds of men. . . .*
—David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion,* 1776

This reality, which mythologies have represented under so many different forms, but which is the universal and eternal objective cause of these sensations sui generis out of which religious experience is made is society. . . .

It is obviously necessary that the religious life be the eminent form and, as it were, the concentrated expression of the whole collective life. If religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion.
—Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse,* 1912

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INTRODUCTION
THE HISTORICAL VICISSITUDES OF THE BHAKTI RELIGION

David N. Lorenzen

In the context of North India, all Sikhs as well as almost all Hindus may be called followers of bhakti religion since their dominant mode of worship is one of "devotion" *(bhakti)* toward a divine being. Although both the ways of expressing this devotion and the ways of conceptualizing the object of this devotion vary dramatically, all manifestations of bhakti religion do share common historical roots. More specifically, all its sects and currents were heavily influenced in their origins, and many still today, by two Sanskrit texts: the *Bhagavad-gita* * and the *Bhagavata* Purana** This common heritage gives all its manifestations a family resemblance that is not shared by other religions of India such as Christianity and Islam in which devotion to a divine being also plays a central role.

Since the latter part of the fifteenth century, bhakti religion in North India has been divided into two major streams or currents—*nirguni** and *saguni**—*ostensibly* on the basis of a theological difference in the way of conceptualizing the nature of the divine being that is the object of worship. Those who prefer *sagun** ("with attributes") bhakti constitute the majority. They worship anthropomorphic manifestations of the divine being, usually forms of the gods Vishnu, Shiva, and the Goddess, and of these gods' close associates or family members. The persons who follow *Nirgun** ("without attributes") bhakti are fewer in number and generally prefer to worship a divine being who remains mostly unmanifest and non-anthropomorphic. Historically, Sikh religion derives from this *Nirguni** current of bhakti religion, although it has established a conscious identity as a separate religion. Exactly how and when it did so is still a matter of scholarly debate as Harjot Oberoi's essay in this book demonstrates.

In actual practice, most followers of *saguni** religion in North India today direct their devotion especially toward two avatars of the god Vishnu—Krishna and Rama—and* toward the latter's associate

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Hanuman *. Fewer persons direct their devotion primarily toward Shiva and the Goddess. Those who do generally worship Shiva in the semi-iconic form of a *linga**, while the Goddess is most often worshipped as Durga* or Mahisamardini*, the killer of the buffalo demon. On the other hand, followers of *Nirguni** religion, including the Sikhs, generally reject worship of the avatars of Vishnu or any other anthropomophic gods or forms of God. Although *Nirguni** literature directs the devotee to worship a formless, universal God, this God does take partial embodiment in the Name of God and in the collective Words (*bani**) and the person of the Guru and the saints. Particularly in the case of the Sikhs, the words of the Guru and the saints take the physical form of a holy Book, the *Adi* Granth* or *Guru* Granth Sahib**.

In this introduction, I will first discuss the relation between religious and social identities in the context of the growth of religious communalism in modem India. Next, I will review the historical development of the social ideologies associated with the traditions of *saguni** and *Nirguni** bhakti. Finally, I will offer some critical comments on the ideas of Max Weber about the nature of low-class religion.

Community Identity and Communalism

Theological differences are not simply the product of historical accident; they are symptomatic and expressive of differences in social identities. Religions are communities of persons who follow, or claim to follow, common systems of beliefs and practices. Even those beliefs and practices that appear to be sociologically and politically arbitrary serve to express and define the limits of any given religious community. In other words, taken together they define the group's identity, its membership and its ideology. This is true even though other factors such as class and caste, gender, ethnic group, language, region, and race generally play important roles in deciding who is likely to become a member of the group.

The Sikhs provide a good example. The essays of Harjot Oberoi and Michael Shapiro in this book illustrate two aspects of the formation of this religious community. Oberoi concentrates on how ritual differences increasingly served to mark and define Sikh identity, while Shapiro shows how distinctive theological features of Sikh religion were woven even into the grammar of the language used in Sikh scripture.

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Many religious beliefs and practices are employed not only to define a given community identity but also to provide a utopian vision for the future of the community and of the society of which it forms a greater or lesser part. In other words, these beliefs and practices are normative both in a descriptive, definitional sense and in an ideal, moral sense. Together they constitute, in short, both the identity and the ideology of the community.

The concept of ideology has been given many senses. I prefer to define it as a form of discourse, primarily verbal but also behavioral, that directly or indirectly claims to describe the structure and functioning of society in such a way as either to justify, or to protest against, an unequal distribution of social status, economic wealth and political power among different groups within the society. Although ideologies inevitably have manipulative aspects, their spokesmen for the most part believe what they say, even if they know, deep down, that it is not the whole story. Ideological discourse is not simply cynical propaganda. Propaganda implies a conscious manipulation of the truth to achieve covert economic, social and political ends that benefit certain groups to the detriment of the society at large. Ideology, on the other hand, functions in much more unconscious, and even altruistic, fashion. For its supporters, an ideology represents the proper, and even the natural, arrangement of society.

The classical Marxist argument that each society has essentially only one ideology, to be identified as the "dominant ideology" of its ruling class, is no longer tenable. [1]Still useful, however, is A. Gramsci's idea that the ideology (or ideologies) of privileged classes may exert, by a combination of persuasion and coercion, a "hegemony" over the ideology (or ideologies) of the nonprivileged classes in the same society (Anderson 1976/77). Indeed, it is precisely the distinction between hegemonic and subordinate or subaltern ideological discourse that underlies the distinction between the *Nirguni** and *saguni** devotional movements, as will be argued below (also Lorenzen 1987a). Furthermore, since ideological discourse always claims that its social prescriptions will benefit the society as a whole—even when in fact they serve as much or more to protect the privileges of an upper-class elite—ideological discourse and discourse that defines community identity are always inextricably linked.

In the context of North India, the term "community identity" inevitably invokes the related concepts of *communal* identity and

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communalism. Communalism, particularly as it relates to devotion to the avatar Ram *, is the single most recalcitrant and dangerous source of social and political conflict in India today. In this book the essays of Lutgendorf, van der Veer and Devalle all are directly concerned with this problem. Clearly some discussion of the concept and the phenomenon is in order.

Perhaps the most lucid discussion of the varied meanings that the terms "communal" (or "communalist") and "communalism" have acquired in the speech of imperialists, nationalists, and assorted academics is that found in Gyanendra Pandey's book, *The Construction of Communalism in North India* (1990). According to Pandey (1990, 6):

> In its common Indian usage the word "communalism" refers to a condition of suspicion, fear and hostility between members of different religious communities. In academic investigations, more often than not, the term is applied to organized political movements based on the proclaimed interests of a religious community, usually in response to a real or imagined threat from another religious community (or communities).

For Pandey, however, the true "meaning" of communalism as a concept is not to be located in its contemporary Indian usages, but rather in the history of the "discourses"—imperialist, nationalist and academic—in which the concept arose and developed. His aim is (1990, 5-6) "to explore the history of the 'problem' of communalism through an examination of the discourse that gave it meaning."

What Pandey finds in his examination of the historical "construction" of the concept is that (1990, 6) "communalism... is a form of colonialist knowledge" since the concept was first developed in the discourse of imperialist administrators who used it as a catchall label for different sorts of social and political unrest. By calling this unrest "religious," these administrators purposely implied that Indian society was fundamentally imbued with religious bigotry and irrationality.

In Pandey's view, nationalists, and to some extent liberal colonialists, have countered this basically racist or "essentialist" interpretation of communalism with another that was more rational and "economistic," but also basically negative (1990, 11): "The nationalists ... recognize communalism as a problem of recent origins, as the outcome basically of economic and political inequality and conflict, and as the handiwork of a handful of self-interested elite groups (colo-

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nial and native), with the mass of people being essentially 'secular'." For both the colonialists and nationalists, communalism has been regarded as an obstacle to the development of a mature nationalism and ultimate self-government. To the extent to which both have shared this bias in favor of nationalism and secularism and the supposed grounding of these "isms" in rational thought, Pandey claims (1990, 13), "both nationalist and colonialist positions derive from the same liberal ideology."

While Pandey's account of the history of the concept does much to illuminate some of the biases and value judgements inherent in its everyday usages, his suggested solution to the "problem" seems to me to be wrong-headed. Rather than to recommend that we simply try to become more conscious of, and thereby correct or modify, the biases and value judgements inherited from colonialist and nationalist discourse, he apparently thinks that it is possible to virtually "deconstruct" the concept of communalism out of existence. In its place, he would prefer that we regard each historical case of conflict between the major religious communities of India on its own terms. For this reason he rejects, in no uncertain terms, the recent historical trend that emphasizes the "continuities" in Indian history, particularly Christopher Bayly's (1985) attempt to identify "The Pre-History of 'Communalism'" in religious conflicts of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For Pandey (1990, 15), "there is really no sense of context here, not a hint that human beings and their actions, the events of history, derive their meaning from the political, economic, social and intellectual circumstances in which they are placed." [2]

One cannot, however, simply deconstruct communalism out of existence in this postmodernist fashion. The "meaning" of the concept of communalism is not exhausted by an analysis of the biases and value judgements inherent in the discourses in which it arose. One can, I think, fairly invoke the well-worn distinction between what a term connotes and what it denotes. Pandey's "meaning" overvalues the connotations of the term at the expense of its denotation, the latter being roughly equivalent to its contemporary everyday usage. Communalism is a concept, but it is a concept that most people employ to refer to and classify a quite specific range of attitudes and actions. Without such classifying terms and concepts, any discourse is of course impossible. In the case of "communalism," I fail to see that Pandey can offer *any* acceptable substitute.

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Pandey may well be correct to reject Bayly's extension of the term communalism to include religious conflicts before 1860, but his charge that Bayly's argument lacks any "sense of context" is unfair. As G. Barraclough has noted (1967), the identification and evaluation of the continuities and discontinuities in society over the passage of time is precisely the principal task that historians undertake. Bayly, of all people, is certainly well aware of the historical context of the examples of religious conflict he has discussed. Where he differs with Pandey is in the much less historically specific meaning he assigns to the concept of communalism. This is the reason Bayly sees continuity where Pandey sees discontinuity.

One vital aspect of any analysis of the phenomenon of communalism is an evaluation of the extent to which it is the product of elite manipulation of popular attitudes and actions. There is little doubt, for instance, that the religious and political elite that control the Rashtriya Svayamsevak Sangh (RSS), Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) have shamelessly manipulated for their own ends the popular religious sentiments invoked by the Ram-janmabhumi * and Babari-masjid* dispute. It is also clear, however, that these elites have been able to draw from a deep well of popular Hindu discontent and antagonism against the Muslim community with roots going back to medieval times. In his essay here, P. Lutgendorf discusses some of this medieval background to communalism, particularly its relation to Tulasidas's* *Ramacharitamanas* * P. van der Veer concentrates more on the association between communalism and the nationalist movement, and S. Devalle tackles the problem of the relation of communalism to modem political ideologies and communalist concepts such as *Hindutva*.

Secular nationalists, including Marxists such as Bipan Chandra, have often regarded communal discontent and antagonism as the product of elite manipulation and a typical manifestation of "false consciousness." Chandra (1984, 1) defines communalism as "the belief that because a group of people follow a particular religion they have, as a result, common social, political and economic interests." In this view, such concrete interests do underlie communalism, but they are the interests of elite manipulators, not the common people. If this were in fact true, however, the destruction of communalism would be relatively simple, at least in theory. One need only educate the people to see how their communalist sentiments are in fact based on elite ma-

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nipulation. It is like the position of the Advaitin who compares illumination to the destruction of an illusory serpent by recognizing that it is *really* a rope.

The chief problem with this point of view is that it underestimates the deep historical roots of the self-identities of the religious communities of India, a subject I will return to shortly. The snake in question is far from illusory. Communalism may well be a comparatively modem phenomenon arising in large measure from elite manipulation, but it is also firmly rooted in community identities that cannot be simply wished away. Furthermore, once created, communal ideology (i.e., one that defines the community in excessively negative, oppositional terms) generates its own social, economic and political reality; it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once the religious Other is radically excluded from the community, he does in fact become a rival in social, political and economic terms as well as religious ones.

Admitting the reality and practical importance of religious communities, however, need not imply that one should abandon the quest for a secular society. Ashis Nandy (1990) tends in this direction when he attempts to promote a more traditional and religious social identity that is at the same time more tolerant and noncommunalist than the "Hindutva" oft he more fundamentalist Hindu nationalists of the RSS, VHP, and BJP. As Peter van der Veer points out in his essay, Nandy can be seen as a post-independence heir to the religious nationalism of Mahatma Gandhi. Somewhat surprisingly, both Gyanendra Pandey (1990, 21-22) and Veena Das (1990) openly flirt with the idea of supporting Nandy's "anti-secularist" position.

Nandy's views and those of Bipan Chandra (1984) provide an instructive comparison, particularly with regard to the evaluation of the role of the state in communal conflict. Both agree that the colonial state played a significant role in fomenting the growth of communalism, but disagree about the role of the state since independence. On the whole, Chandra views the independent state as a relatively neutral arbiter in situations of communal conflict and argues that this positive neutrality is closely linked to the espousal of a secular ideology. Nandy on the other hand regards the "secular" state as often being a source of communal conflict and pins his hopes for avoiding such conflict on the traditional religious tolerance of the majority Hindu community. As van der Veer points out, however, this tolerance is grounded on the doctrine of a hierarchy of religious truths wherein different religions

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are thought to have received partial revelations of a spiritual reality that is fully manifest only in Hinduism. It is not surprising that the followers of other religions—particularly those that claim virtually exclusive access to God's message such as Christianity and Islam—do not share Nandy's enthusiasm for this doctrine of tolerance.

Chandra's evaluation of the role of religion in communalism tries to make a distinction between “religiosity," which is bad, and "religion," which is good. He defines religiosity as a (1984, 171) "deep and intense emotional commitment to matters of religion and as the tendency to let religion and religious emotions intrude into non-religious or non-spiritual areas of life and beyond the individual's private life, to refuse to separate religion from politics, economics and social life— that is, to be over-religious or to have too much religion in one's life." As van der Veer points out, however, this idea of religion as something personal and separate "from politics, economics and social life" is a quite dubious ideological proposition derived from the European Enlightenment. In Europe and North America religion did in fact to some extent retreat into a more private domain as a result of, first, the necessity of neutralizing the conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism and, second, the rise of the modern nation-state and science. Even in Europe, however, the idea that ethics and values can be empirically (rather than simply logically) separated into personal (religious) and social (political) categories is at best a well-meaning hope that repeatedly flies in the face of reality.

In the case of modern India, Chandra argues that (1984, 167) religious difference was used "to 'mask' the politics of classes and social groups arising in the secular, non-religious spheres." One has to agree with Chandra that communalism represents "too much religion in one's life," but he is mistaken when he argues that this represents an improper overflow of religion into other, nonreligious aspects of life. In large measure religious ethics and values are, in a very basic sense, also expressions of social, economic and political needs and aspirations, as scholars as diverse as Marx, Nietzsche, Durkheim, and Weber long ago recognized. From this point of view, both religions and political philosophies can be regarded as considerably overlapping subsets of the more general category of "ideology."

In its propensity for violence and irrational hatred, communalism has sometimes been called “pathological," an epithet that Pandey (1990, 9-10) and Devalle reject, but that Chandra and Nandy accept (at least

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implicitly). [3]Provided that this term is understood to be a metaphor, a physiological analogy, it can be of use. The pathology of communalism stems from its exaggerated elaboration of otherwise "normal" aspects of community identity, not the introduction of strange new abnormalities. It is analogous to the pathology of an individual whose commonplace fears, hates or desires—whether rational or not—become obsessive and out of control. In communalism, the defining attributes and ideology of a religious community become obsessively directed against other communities. This obsessive hatred represents a reaction that far outstrips any conceivable objective threat that these opposing communities might pose. The hatred expressed—whether fomented by elite manipulation or not—has become basically irrational and ultimately self-destructive.

If communalism is a pathological condition, an obsessively op-positional form of community identity, it is fair to ask about its causes, the etiology of the pathology. There have been four principal historical factors, I think, that have fostered the development of communalism in South Asia, apart from and in addition to the underlying problem of the existence of several religious communities in one territory.

The first factor is the adoption of the modem ideas of nationalism and popular sovereignty by the Indian elites in the latter part of the nineteenth century and the participation of these elites in nationalist organizations, both secular and nonsecular, as well as in other collective political groups such as caste associations. There is in fact considerable truth to the liberal-secular claim that, as Pandey puts it (1990, 14), "communalism was nationalism gone awry." Both Hindu nationalists and Islamic nationalists insisted that their respective religious communities were also nations or national communities. More recently the advocates of Khalistan have made the same claim for the Sikh community.

A second, related factor is the introduction oft he system of electoral politics, first in limited fashion by the British colonialist regime, and later in the democratic parliamentary governments of independent India and Pakistan (the latter remaining democratic only in fits and starts). Electoral politics as a total system—and not simply its directly "communal" aspects such as the issue of separate electorates—inevitably leads to competition between all sorts of communities, including religious ones, for government support in satisfying economic, educational and social goals. As is well known, the British colonial government often

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cynically and cruelly exploited this competition using the tactic of divide and rule, thereby setting a precedent that is still often followed. The identification of religious communities in the decennial census of the population, an institution closely linked to the development of electoral politics, also contributed much to the growth of communal consciousness.

A third important factor is the demographic explosion which began, or at least became more acute, in the nineteenth century and has continued, only partly controlled, up to the present day. This explosion has helped create dramatic scarcities of agricultural land and other natural resources and made it virtually impossible for the supply of jobs to keep pace with the ever increasing number of job-seekers. The resulting economic and social tensions have been easily channeled into communalist conflicts. [4]

A fourth factor, mostly derived from the others, is the failure of the postcolonial political regime in India to satisfy the hopes of the mass of the population for peace, social order and economic prosperity. Although most national and state governments have made sincere efforts to follow secular policies, the failure to satisfy these hopes have inevitably led to discontents that are easily exploited by Hindu nationalist organizations such as the RSS, VHP, and BJP. Particularly tragic, since it was more avoidable, has been the endless international conflict with Pakistan. Whichever country has been more to blame, and whatever has been the role of the cold war in perpetuating the conflict, the wounds of partition have never healed, and the Muslim community of India remains an easy target for accusations of disloyalty and fifth-column activities by Hindu nationalists. Also significant has been the introduction of a certain amount of communalist propaganda ("playing the Hindu card") by the Congress Party, traditionally the most resolutely secular party, into the general election campaign of 1984, as Devalle notes in her essay. This set a dangerous precedent that may have contributed substantially to the legitimation of communalist parties, particularly the BJP in this and subsequent elections.

Beyond these general, structural factors for the rise and persistence of communalism—factors that largely define communalism as an identifiable historical phenomenon—each specific example of communal conflict must obviously be examined on its own terms and in its own historical context. What were the existing local tensions that made the social terrain ripe for the outbreak of communal conflict? What was

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the immediate cause of the conflict? How did the conflict proceed? What was the role of the police and government in resolving or aggravating the conflict? What part did existing communal organizations play? Only postmortem examinations of each specific conflict can answer such questions.

It remains true, however, that communalism cannot arise without the prior existence of a religious community. As commonly defined in India, communalism is based on the broadest of all community identities: those of the Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus. Each of these broad communities embodies a full range of social classes and castes as well as an ample number of separate religious currents, sects, subsects, and individual congregations. How is it possible for such heterogeneous communities to create social identities cohesive enough to make possible the pathology of communalism?

Part of the answer undoubtedly lies in the overlap of national and communal identities and the association of each religious community with specific "home" territories: Pakistan and Bangladesh for the Muslims (though this is obviously of dubious value for the Muslim community in India), Punjab for the Sikhs, and all of postindependence India for the Hindus. More important, however, is the fact that each of these communities offers its members a common history (even if often largely imagined), a more or less common set of religious beliefs and practices, and a common social ideology. Each community can also reinforce its group identity by referring to their long histories of mutual conflict and the associated process of self-definition by means of mutual opposition.

For reasons that are not entirely clear to me, a number of contemporary academics have attempted to deny the existence of this long history of mutual conflict and oppositional self-definition among these three religious communities. In particular, they have claimed that in India the very concepts of Hindus and Hinduism as *religious,* as opposed to *ethnic* and/or *geographical,* categories were created in quite recent times. C. J. Fuller's comments in his recent book on popular Hinduism provide a good example (1992, 10):

> Consider the very terms "Hindu" and "Hinduism." The Persian word *hindu* derives from Sindhu, the Sanskrit name of the river Indus (in modem Pakistan). It originally meant a native of India, the land around and beyond the Indus. When "Hindu" (or "Hindoo") entered the English language in the seventeenth century, it was similarly used to denote any native of Hindustan (India), but

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gradually came to mean someone who retained the indigenous religion and had not converted to Islam. "Hinduism," as a term for that indigenous religion, became current in English in the early nineteenth century and was coined to label an "ism" that was itself partly a product of western orientalist thought, which (mis)constructed Hinduism on the model of occidental religions, particularly Christianity. Hinduism, in other words, came to be seen as a system of doctrines, beliefs, and practices properly equivalent to those that make up Christianity, and "Hindu" now clearly specified an Indian's religious affiliation.

In point of fact, the Muslim intellectual al-Biruni (1964) had already clearly delineated the system of religious doctrines, beliefs, and practices of the Hindu community, as opposed to the system of Islam, early in the eleventh century. One can perhaps object that he should be considered a Muslim outsider or an unrepresentative intellectual. Moving ahead to the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, however, one finds that the poems of virtually all *nirguni* * saints beginning with Kabir* and Guru* Nanak* repeatedly refer to "Hindus and Turks" and "Hindus and Muslims *[musulaman*]"* in contexts that clearly show that the authors had in mind religious, and not ethnogeographical, communities. These poems generally follow a pattern in which the Hindus are said to do or believe one thing (worship Vishnu and Shiva, etc.) and the Muslims/Turks another (pray to Mecca, etc.), but neither knows the highest Truth. Medieval *saguni** authors more often speak simply in terms of "us" versus the *mlechchhas* or *yavans,* but even these authors can hardly be accused of not understanding the contrasting natures of the religious beliefs and practices of the two communities. Some eighteenth-century Englishmen may have confused ethnogeographical and religious categories, but they did not acquire this confusion from the Indians themselves. Even today Spanish speakers still commonly call all the inhabitants of India *hindúes,* whatever their religious affiliation. Here the confusion clearly stems from ignorance based on a lack of contact, not a conscious resort to an ancient geographical etymology.

All this suggests that in fact the Hindu community of India became much more conscious of its identity as a community under the stimulus of its contact with the Islam of the Turks, Afghans and Mughals who invaded India in the medieval period. Sheldon Pollock (1993) has forcefully argued that the rise of the worship of the avatar Rama* in this

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same period was in large part a response to the Muslim presence and the Hindu search for a cohesive oppositional identity.

Social Ideologies of Bhakti Traditions

As was noted at the outset of this discussion, the tradition of *sagun* * bhakti has been dominant in the Hindu community for a thousand years or possibly more. *Nirguni** tradition has also exercised considerable influence in North India since about 1500. Except in the Punjab, however, it has remained a subordinate, minority tradition subject to the "hegemony" of the *saguni** tradition. Older "orthodox" traditions such as those centered around Vedic recitation and sacrifice, philosophic and yogic enlightenment, and Tantrism, have continued to exist, but none of them remains the principal religious concern of more than a small number of elite practitioners. Even these practitioners have often syncretically combined their traditions with that of *sagun** bhakti.

One of the basic functions of the dominant religious tradition of any given society, in the present case *sagun** bhakti, is to articulate a social ideology intended to serve as a sort of psychological glue that helps preserve both harmony and privilege within the religious community and within the society as a whole (including its subordinate communities). In practice, however, most ruling elites are forced to resort to direct coercion, or the threat of such coercion, in order to maintain their hegemony over the rest of society. Rarely if ever do the subaltern (Gramsci) or nonprivileged (Weber) classes of society either wholeheartedly accept the ruling ideology or knuckle under elite domination without some form of (usually covert) resistance (see Scott 1990 and Devalle 1985). In North India, *nirgun** bhakti has served as one of the more significant forms of ideological resistance of these classes.

Although the contrast between the *saguni** and *nirguni** traditions is usually defined in theological terms—both by outside observers and by the followers of these two traditions—it is the social ideologies of the two traditions that lie behind and give strength to these differing theologies. And behind the ideologies lie the communities themselves. This is why the obvious theological affinity between *nirguni** tradition and orthodox Advaita—an affinity that Sanskritizing intellectuals within the Kabir* Panth such as Hanumaddas* (Lorenzen 1981) often cite as a

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proof of Kabir's * greatness—is ultimately of little significance. However similar the theologies may be, neither the social ideologies nor the communities that have supported the two movements have had much in common.

More significant are the obvious similarities—stemming in part from their shared historical roots—of *nirgun** and *sagun** bhakti. Some scholars have gone so far as to deny that the differences between the two traditions are significant. John Hawley, who does acknowledge important differences, nonetheless insists (1988, 4) that "we are talking about a single family of saints ... the family of *bhakti."* Much can be said in favor of this point of view. For example, even though the social bases of two traditions—and the movements within each—can be fairly clearly distinguished, these bases do have considerable overlap. It is also true that the songs and verses of the major poet-saints of both traditions are often loved by the common people in rather indiscriminate fashion. In his essay here, Philip Lutgendorf argues that there is a progressive, *nirgun*-like* side even to Tulasidas*, who is more often regarded as the maximum champion of a conservative interpretation of *varnasramadharma** within the *saguni** camp.

John Hawley, in his essay here, points out that many medieval manuscripts contain collections of songs by both *nirguni** and *saguni** poet-saints. As Hawley has noted elsewhere with regard to the poetry of Sur* Das* (1984, 121-60), however, it is common for most *saguni** poets to dedicate some songs to God in his transcendent, *nirguni** aspect A much closer examination of the individual songs in these "mixed" manuscripts is needed before we can determine to what extent they do in fact span the theological and social divide between the two traditions.

While some scholars have stressed the common features of *nirguni** *and saguni** traditions, many well-known Hindi scholars—most notably Pitambar Barthwal, Parasuram* Chaturvedi*, and Hazari* Prasad* Dvivedi*—have emphasized their differences. Most of the mostly American and European scholars in K. Schomer and W. H. McLeod's edited volume *The Sants* (1987) have also emphasized the differences, both theological and ideological.[5] In what follows I will try to explain why I strongly support the view that these differences are more important than the similarities.

Since *sagun** bhakti is historically prior to *nirgun** bhakti and, more importantly, has come to embody the hegemonic ideology of modem Hindu society, we should begin by looking at how this tradi-

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tion has been structured. Historically, *sagun** bhakti represents a "liberal" reform of an earlier Vedic and *sastrik** Hinduism that had become the exclusive province of a small, all-male, Brahmin elite who unilaterally barred the rest of the population from any direct eligibility for salvation, or even from hearing the Vedic texts on which the Brahmins' religious authority depended. Even so enlightened a philosopher as Sankaracharya* (c. 750) maintains just such a socially reactionary argument (Lorenzen 1987b).

Without in any way directly challenging the Brahmins' exclusive control over the Vedas, *sagun** bhakti did attempt, often somewhat reluctantly, to open the doors of salvation to all persons including women and members of most nonprivileged classes *(varnas*).* Only the Untouchables *(avarna*)* were excluded from this right, and even their exclusion was often left ambiguous. Perhaps the earliest, and certainly the most important, statement of this extension of salvation to previously excluded groups is found in the *Bhagavad-gita** (9.32): "Those who take their refuge in me, O Partha*, even if they are born from a sinful womb, or as women, Vaisyas* or Sudras*; even *they* will reach the highest goal."

In the *Bhagavad-gita** this path to salvation through bhakti coexists, somewhat uneasily, with two other paths: that of wisdom or gnosis *(jnana*)* and that of disinterested proper conduct *(karma).* Several scholars, most recently A. L. Basham (1989), have in fact argued that the *Bhagavad-gita** chapters propounding the bhakti path represent a later addition welded onto the earlier sections of the text. Many scholars within Hindu tradition have also been well aware of the logical incompatibilities among the paths of bhakti, gnosis and proper conduct and have attempted to smooth over the rough spots with two supplementary doctrines: that of socially appropriate levels of worship and that of the crisis of the Kali Yuga, our present benighted age.

The doctrine of socially appropriate levels of worship maintains that the path of gnosis is appropriate only for learned Brahmins, while bhakti is especially appropriate for lower levels of society including women and Sudras*. In the conservative Advaita version of this doctrine, gnosis is the *only* path that can lead directly to salvation, but sincere bhakti can at least lead to an eventual birth as a learned male Brahmin and hence to salvation. In Madhava's* *Sankaradigvijaya*,* a medieval hagiographic life of the Advaita philosopher Sankaracharya*, Sankara* is confronted with the dilemma of advising his dying mother

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on how to approach death. He first offers her instruction about the unqualified Absolute (*nirguna-brahman *),* but she finds this too difficult to understand. Next he recites a hymn to Shiva, but when this god's messengers appear she rejects them. Finally, Sankara* recites a hymn to Vishnu-Krishna, and his mother allows this god's messengers to lead her to the highest heaven.[6]

The second supplementary doctrine is that of the crisis of the present, infernal Kali Yuga. This doctrine claims that in this age the paths of gnosis and proper conduct are no longer available to men (much less to women). In the present age, our intellectual, moral and social condition is simply too degenerate for any path to salvation to function apart from bhakti. It is for that very reason that God (usually identified with Vishnu) introduced the path of bhakti to make salvation available in this Kali Yuga. Often the texts go on to claim that birth in our Kali Yuga is paradoxically the most fortunate birth possible, since in this age God has made available this easy path of bhakti by which everyone—even women and Sudras*—can win direct salvation with little or no effort on their own part, exactly how little effort being an issue for debate among rival theological schools. For example, in the *Bhagavata* Purana** the sage Karabhajana* tells king Nimi:[7]

> Noble persons—those who appreciate good qualities and partake of their essence—honor the Kali Yuga. In it all one's aims are realized simply by chanting the name of God *[samkirtana*]*.... In the Krta* and other ages, O king, the people long for a birth in the Kali Yuga. Indeed, in the Kali Yuga [good people] worship Narayana*.

One of the principal innovations of bhakti religion was the central role given to telling stories about the lives of avatars and saints. Here a distinction needs to be made between stories that are basically myths, that is, have little or no historical foundation, and those that are basically legends, that is, involve a mixture of myth and history. Although the dividing line between these two categories is sometimes rather fuzzy, stories about avatars clearly belong to the first category and stories about poet-saints such as Kabir* and Mirabai* clearly belong to the second. Although this distinction is not openly made in Hindu tradition, it corresponds very closely to the distinction made there between stories about the avatars and saints of former *yugas* and those

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about the saints of "our own" Kali Yuga. The term "hagiography" should be limited to such legendary stories about the saints of the Kali Yuga.

The doctrine of the avatars of Vishnu is already present in the *Bhagavad-gita* * (4.7), where Krishna says: "Wherever there is a lessening of dharma, O Bharata, and an increase of non-dharma, at that time I send myself [to earth as an avatar]." The phrase "in every age" in fact implies ages other than the Kali Yuga. Most texts assume that all the major past avatars, with the exception of the Buddha and the future avatar Kalki, were born in earlier yugas. Even though the direct activity of the avatars in the world has long since ended (or not yet begun), the proponents of *sagun** bhakti argue that devotion to these avatars can still lead to their intercession on behalf of their devotees and to personal salvation, conceived of as either the end of rebirth and individual existence or as a final birth in Vishnu's heaven.

An important difference between *saguni** and *nirguni** traditions is that the stories about avatars are a basic defining element of the former, while in the latter usually either the existence of the avatars is denied or their importance downgraded. The few *pauranik** stories about avatars and saints that are popular in *nirguni** circles—most notably those about Prahlad*, Dhruv and Jad* Bharat—appear to mostly derive directly from the *Bhagavata** *Purana** and to concern legendary saints who are the patient victims of unjust suffering (see Lorenzen 1992).

Nonetheless, both traditions have come to give a prominent place to hagiography, particularly to stories about the founders and principal poets of specific sectarian traditions. These include the *saguni** saints Chaitanya, Vallabhacharya*, Sur* Das*, Mirabai*, Tulasidas*, Narasi* Mehata*, and Tukaram*, and the *nirguni** saints Namadev*, Kabir*, Raidas*, Pipa*, Guru* Nanak*, Dadu* Dayal*, and Haridas* Niranjani*. To these may also be added the somewhat less historical Nath* saints, Gorakhanath* and Gopichanda*.[8]

The importance of hagiography in medieval and modern bhakti tradition contrasts sharply with the lack of interest in it in Vedic and *sastrik** Hinduism, where almost the only important hagiographies are a few late medieval texts about Ramanuja* and Sankaracharya*. The inspiration for these texts was probably vernacular hagiographic literature of bhakti religion in any case (Lorenzen 1983). This absence of hagiography in Vedic and *sastrik** Hinduism ultimately derives from the rejection of historical precedent as a source for spiritual authority

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by the traditional exponents of Vedic exegesis, particularly the followers of Mimamsa *. Philosophers such as Kumarila* Bhatta* claimed that the authority of the Vedas and *sastras**—and hence of the Brahmins that know them—is eternal, revealed and independent of the process of historical creation (see Pollock 1990 and 1989). In this view, religious Truth cannot have a human origin. The ancient sages were only the transmitters of the Vedas, not their authors. These texts, and the Truth they embody, exist eternally outside the realm of time and human effort. The history of specific peoples and individuals belongs to a secondary, mundane realm and has little or no relevance to spiritual Truth.

It should be noted that historical precedent and authority—expressed principally through hagiography and genealogies of teachers and disciples—tends to play a somewhat more prominent role in *nirguni** than in *saguni** religion. This is particularly true of Sikh tradition in which the historical saga of the ten Gurus* has been indispensible to the formation of Sikh identity. Within *nirguni** tradition, the distinction between myth and legend, between the avatars of former yugas and the saints of our Kali Yuga, is sometimes purposely made ambiguous. In her essay here, Uma Thukral discusses the Purana-like* hagiographies of the Dharmadasi* branch of the Kabir* Panth in which Kabir* is treated as an avatar. Insofar as this literature mimics *saguni** Puranas*, it can be regarded as a product of Sanskritization, the emulation of higher caste culture. On the other hand, Dharmadasi* hagiography also aims to replace and finally subvert the *saguni** Puranas*. In my own essay on *nirguni** hagiographies, I have focused on the extent to which the life stories of various *nirguni** saints tend to follow a hagiographic pattern similar to, but not completely identical with, the life stories of *saguni** saints.

The doctrine of transmigration and rebirth, called by Max Weber a "theodicy," forms one of the two central pillars of the ethics of *saguni** religion. If one behaves properly, one can expect a better rebirth in one's next life, above all a rebirth as a male in a higher caste. Not surprisingly, the followers of *nirguni** tradition generally manifest little enthusiasm for this theodicy and for the law of karma in particular. *Nirguni** poets do usually accept the idea of the cycle of rebirth tied to the moral character of one's actions, but tend to regard all human births as rare and equally valuable. Kabir* says (1972, *sakhi** 115): "A human birth is hard to get. It won't come a second time. Once a ripe fruit has

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fallen, it won't reattach itself to the branch." Edward Henry's essay on contemporary *nirguni* * songs in this volume gives some indication of the continuing vitality of these ideas, as does Schaller's essay on the contemporary movement of the followers of Raidas*.

The second pillar of *saguni** ethics is, of course, the doctrine of *varnasramadharma** (the law of social classes and stages of life). According to this doctrine, one obtains a better rebirth precisely by following the rules of conduct appropriate to the *varna** (roughly "class") and *jati** (caste) in which one was born. The rules of behavior for different *varnas** are set out in elaborate detail in the legal texts of Hindu tradition: the *dharmasutras*, dharmasastras** and legal digests. These texts provide sometimes conflicting legal expressions of the social and ethical norms implicit in the doctrines of rebirth and *varnasramadharma**. Taken together, these laws and underlying norms constitute the social ideology of *sagun** bhakti and other "orthodox" forms of Hindu tradition.

As is well known, the doctrine of the four hierarchically structured *varnas** can be traced all the way back to the *Rg* Veda* (10.90). Even the more detailed legal expression of *varnasramadharma** ideology was well established before the appearance of the *sagun** bhakti of the *Bhagavad-gita**. This latter text makes its support for this ideology quite explicit when Krishna explains what he means by "proper conduct" (3.35): "Better is one's own dharma, even if imperfect, than the dharma of another, though well-performed. Better is death in one's own dharma. The dharma of another brings only danger." Later and longer *saguni** texts, including the influential *Bhagavata* Purana**, are repeatedly laced with lengthy didactic passages that present elaborate expositions of the doctrines of transmigration and rebirth and of *varnasramadharma**.

Apologists for this ideology, including the ancient authors of the *dharmasastras** and modem religious and academic intellectuals, have always been quick to point out that this model of a hierarchically ordered society assigns specific economic and social rights to each *varna** and *jati**. In both theory and practice, however, more and better rights were always given to the social groups with higher social status. For this reason it is logical to ask to what extent does *sagun** bhakti's support for *varnasramadharma** represent a manipulation of religion for economic, political and status-related ends by the mostly Brahmin

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elite that wrote the *saguni* * texts and propagated them among the general population, and by these Brahmins' immediate class allies and patrons, the wealthy landowners and merchants? In Marxist terms: to what extent has *sagun** bhakti embodied support for a typical dominant ideology?

Any convincing answer to this question would require the presentation of more empirical evidence than is possible within the limits of this essay. My own opinion is that such ideological manipulation by social elites, particularly by the Brahmin priesthood, is in fact a major element of *saguni** religion. The essays here by Lutgendorf, even as he defends Tulasi's* social liberalism, and by van der Veer, who more directly attacks the ideology of Hindu nationalist organizations, do, I think, provide evidence that *saguni** bhakti has served to justify *varnasramadharma** and the status and privileges of Brahmins and other upper-caste groups.

This does not mean that *saguni** religion is simply Brahmin or upper-class propaganda. As has been noted, ideology and propaganda are quite different concepts. For the most part the supporters of *saguni** religion sincerely believe that *varnasramadharma** serves the interests of all those who belong to the society, the high and the low, for without it there would be only social chaos, often described as the condition of *matsyanyaya** (the law of the fishes), wherein the bigger eat the smaller.

Even when dominant ideologies such as *varnasramadharma** are expounded by upper-class groups with sincerity and good will, however, some element of rational calculation of self-interest is undoubtedly present. Likewise, it is certainly not the case that the lower-classes of society do not to some extent "see through" the class bias of dominant ideologies. When they do so, they sometimes reject these ideologies outright and sometimes reinterpret and refashion them in the light of their own interests and needs.[9]

It is easy to demonstrate that *nirguni** religion, particularly in its early stages, has embodied a fairly direct rejection of the ideology of *varnasramadharma**. It is somewhat more difficult to identify the ways in which the lower-class and female followers of *saguni** religion have reinterpreted its ideology to suit their own interests. In this area, much empirical research remains to be done. Some indication of the ways in which these lower-class followers may pick and choose among different *saguni** doctrines is suggested by the ways in which the few *saguni**

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authors who are from non-Brahmin castes or are women do so. The work of Eleanor Zelliot on Chokhamela * (1981 and in this book) and of Parita Mukta on Mirabai and her low-caste adherents (1991) discuss two important examples of this process.[10]

When we come to *nirguni** religion, the lower-class and lower-caste identity of most of its followers and many of its leaders and poets is not in doubt. In particular, Brahmins are almost completely absent. In the poetry of the more important early leaders of *nirguni** tradition such as Kabir*, Raidas* and Guru* Nanak*, the outright rejection of the theology, ritual practices, and social ideology of *saguni** religion is clear and explicit. Good evidence for the oppositional ideology of *nirguni** religion is found here in the essays of Schaller on the Raidasi* movement and Juergensmeyer on the Radhasoamis. Also interesting in this context are Gold's essay on the Naths in Jodhpur and Gupta's on the Kina* Rami*. Neither the Naths, nor the Kina* Rami* are followers of specifically *nirguni** movements, although they are perhaps more *nirguni** than *saguni**. Nonetheless, both are mostly non-Brahmin and both have fostered social ideologies that generally deny that the Brahmins deserve a privileged status.

The opposition of the proponents of *nirgun** bhakti to *sagun** bhakti is easy to document, since the *nirguni** movement in large measure represents an ideological and religious contestation to *sagun** bhakti (at the same time that it appropriates many of the latter's basic beliefs and practices). It should also be noted, however, that some of the proponents of *sagun** bhakti have also expressed their opposition to *nirgun** bhakti. Tulasidas's* descriptions of the horrors of the Kali Yuga contain several good examples:[11]

> In this Kali Yuga the "devotees" describe bhakti by reciting verses, songs, couplets, stories, and anecdotes while they scorn the Vedas and Puranas*.
>
> The Sudras* dispute with Brahmins. They cast angry looks and scold: "Are we something less than you? Whoever knows *brahman* becomes a noble Brahmin.
>
> Without any knowledge of *brahman,* women and men speak about nothing else. They are so controlled by greed that for a mere trifle they physically attack Brahmins and gurus.

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Max Weber and Lower-Class Religion

Surprisingly few academic scholars have attempted to theorize about the religious traditions and communities of subordinate classes, although the discussions of African-American religion by scholars such as E. Genovese and L. Levine represent an important exception. For a more general theoretical discussion of the problem, however, one must go back to Max Weber's essay "Religion of Non-Privileged Classes" (1963), first published in 1922. Rereading Weber's analysis, one is struck by how dated some of his theories now seem, as well as by how impossibly broad, and sometimes biased, were many of his generalizations. Today it is difficult to take seriously claims such as the following:

> The influence of women only tended to intensify those aspects of

religion that were emotional or hysterical. Such was the case in India. (1963, 106)

> It follows that the belief in ethical compensation is even more alien to warriors and to financial magnates who have economic interests in war and in the political manifestations of power. These groups are the least accessible to the ethical and rational elements in any religion. (1963, 97)

> Therefore, the rationalism of the proletariat . . . cannot in the nature of the case easily possess a religious character and certainly cannot easily generate a religion. Hence, in the sphere of proletarian rationalism, religion is generally supplanted by other ideological surrogates. (1963, 100-101)

> The lowest Hindu classes in particular clung to their caste duties with the greatest tenacity as a prerequisite for their rebirth into a better position. (1963, 109)

In spite of such improprieties, however, Weber must still be given credit for attempting to explain how and why the religions of the nonprivileged classes are—in important ways and notwithstanding all their considerable diversity—distinct from the religions of the privileged ("elite," "dominant" or "hegemonic") classes. Weber saw clearly that these differences have a logic that in large measure depends on the

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specific social, economic and political situations in which these privileged and nonprivileged classes find themselves.

Weber's only important predecessor in the analysis of the social basis of religious movements was Nietzsche. Particularly in his discussion of the sentiment of *ressentiment,* Weber takes Nietzsche as his implicit point of departure. Weber claims that while *ressentiment* played an important role in "Jewish ethical salvation religion," it did not do so "among the Hindus and Buddhists, for whom personal suffering is individually merited." At least as far as *nirguni* * devotional Hinduism is concerned, Weber is mistaken, for *ressentiment* certainly is present—though the term itself is needlessly negative—in its repeated arguments for social equality and against Brahmins and the gods of *saguni** Hinduism.

In his work *The Religion* of *India,* Weber (1958) begins his discussion of the rise of devotional Hinduism with a hopelessly dated and misguided theory about the "sexual-orgiastic origin of *bhakti* ecstasy." Unfortunately, this hypothesis colors and vitiates the whole of his subsequent analysis of the topic. It is also painfully evident that many of his sources were wrong about basic facts. Only two minor arguments can perhaps be salvaged from the wreckage. First is his claim that the "Islamic foreign domination" (1958, 312) of the medieval period led to a situation in which "the external means of power of the Brahmans decayed and the founders of the sects sought more than ever to join forces with the masses." Second, but somewhat more dubious, is his assertion (1958, 324-25) that "it was fast the foreign domination of Islam . . . which gave the development of *guru* power free reign, permitting it to grow to grotesque heights." For the rest, the less said about Weber's discussion of medieval and modem Hinduism the better.

Considerably more useful for a discussion of this same topic are Weber's more general remarks about the religious perspective of artisan and other "lower middle class" groups in his "Religion of Non-Privileged Classes." He first notes (1963, 95) that such groups in fact tend to manifest a great "diversity of religious attitudes." He then claims (1963, 96), however, that despite this diversity, "there is apparent in these lower middle classes, in contrast to the peasantry, a definite tendency towards congregational religion, towards religion of salvation, and finally towards rational ethical religion."

Virtually all the founders—and probably a majority of the earliest followers—of the *nirguni** devotional movement of North India

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came from a variety of artisan and other lower-middle-class groups. The four principal early leaders of the movement comprise a weaver (Kabir *), a minor bureaucrat (Guru* Nanak*), a leather-worker (Raidas*), and a cotton-carder (Dadu*). Almost none of the leaders, or followers, of the movement have come from Brahmin castes. The situation with regard to the *saguni** devotional movement in North India is markedly different, since this movement has always been led overwhelmingly by Brahmins. Virtually the only significant exceptions have been Mirabai*, a royal princess; Tukaram*, a shopkeeper; Chokhamela*, a village servant (Mahar*); and Sankaradev* of Assam, a clerk (Kayastha*). It should also be noted, however, that in strictly *class* (i.e., occupational) terms a large proportion of Brahmins—excluding those who earned their living directly from traditional religious offices—practised middle- or lower-middle-class occupations as bureaucrats, clerks, teachers, shopkeepers, and the like.

The affinity of the artisan and other lower-middle-class Hindu groups of India for congregational religion can be seen in several characteristic institutions and practices of devotional Hinduism. These include the "association with the good" *(satsanga*)* for the purpose of religious discussion; the giving and attending public sermons *(pravachan);* group sessions for the singing of religious hymns *(bhajans)* or chanting *(sankirtan*)*; and the public recitation of the sacred texts of the tradition *(path*)*. (See Thiel-Horstmann 1989, 141-42.) Other institutions and practices, however, are considerably more individualistic. The taking of darshan, for example, is basically an individual transaction between the worshipper and his object of devotion, even when it occurs in a public context. The same may be said of intoning the Name of God *(jap)* and "self-study" *(svadhyay*)*. Other practices typical of devotional Hinduism may be either congregrational or individualistic depending on the social context in which they are performed. These include making various kinds of offerings *(puja** of flowers, fruits, *arati**, etc.) and going on pilgrimage *(tirthayatra**, etc.). Many of these practices are characteristic of Hinduism in general, but the congregational ones are definitely much more prominent in the devotional Hinduism of lower-middle-class groups, as Weber suggests.

A single-minded quest for personal salvation characterizes virtually all forms of Hinduism with the possible exception of the most orthodox Vedic cults. As has been noted, devotional Hinduism's quest for salvation is distinguished less by the nature of the goal than by the

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means to it. For philosophic Hinduism, especially Advaita Vedanta *, the means is gnosis or intellectual enlightenment *(jnana*)*. For the practitioners of yoga, the means is a combination of physical and mental control. For devotional Hinduism it is devotion *(bhakti)* combined in various ways with the grace *(prasad*)* of God and guru. Another important difference is that devotional Hinduism makes salvation directly available, albeit often rather begrudgingly in *saguni** texts, to all persons, including women and members of low castes.

Weber's final (and presumably "highest") characteristic of lower-middle-class religion is its tendency "towards rational ethical religion." The extent to which this trait characterizes devotional Hinduism is debatable. Insofar as most religions Coy definition according to some scholars) assert that a supernatural entity or entities play a primary role in both metaphysics and ethics, it is hard for me to understand how any such religion can be said to be significantly more "rational" than any other. By "non-rational" religion Weber apparently has in mind the ceremony and ritual of the Catholic Church and the "magical" practices of primitive and "peasant" religion. At least among anthropologists, however, any attempt to objectively distinguish between magic and religion, a favorite theme from Frazer to Malinowski, has long since been abandoned. Although the distinction continues to have some "common sense" or "rule of thumb" utility, most anthropologists have concluded that calling a practice "magical" rather than "religious" implies more a pejorative judgement than a meaningful distinction. The distinction Weber makes between more and less rational religion is, I think, based more on just such a value judgement than on objective analysis.

Weber's causal explanation for the characteristics of artisan and lower middle-class religion is simply a variant of the basic thesis of his famous essay "The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism." In "Religion of Non-Privileged Classes," he outlines the argument as follows (p. 97):

> Yet it is still true in theory that the middle class, by virtue of its distinctive pattern of economic life, inclines in the direction of a rational ethical religion, wherever conditions are present for the emergence of a rational ethical religion. When one compares the life of a lower-middle-class person, particularly the urban artisan or the small trader, with the life of the peasant, it is clear that

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middle-class life has far less connection with nature. Consequently, dependence on magic for influencing the irrational forces of nature cannot play the same role for the urban dweller as for the farmer. At the same time, it is clear that the economic foundation of the urban man's life has a far more rational essential character, viz., calculability and capacity for purposive manipulation.

If, however, the notion of a radical distinction between magical and "rational" religion can no longer be accepted, it is hard to see how Weber's thesis can continue to be maintained. In any case, the idea that the economic life of peasants is somehow significantly less rational than that of merchants and artisans is, on the face of it, preposterous. What, after all, is so irrational about the techniques of cultivation, the selling of crops, buying seeds, taking credit from money-lenders, hiring laborers, and other regular facets of peasant life? Indeed, peasants must rationally plan for their economic survival over far longer periods than most artisans and merchants.

The basic reason for the primacy of artisans and other, mostly urban, members of lower-middle-class groups in the creation of new religious movements is in fact quite simple. It is the urban or semi-urban environment in which most artisans and small merchants and bureaucrats live. This gives them greater access to a variety of religious preachers, to education, to literacy and books, to a great variety of personal relations, and in general to the greater riches of urban culture. Once such new religious movements of urban artisans and lower-middle-class groups are established, however, they often quickly spread to incorporate the peasant populations of the rural hinterland.

In India, once the *nirguni* * devotional movements of Kabir*, Raidas*, Guru* Nanak*, and Dadu* were established in more or less urban settings, they made just such a quick spread into the countryside. From quite early times, the backbone of Guru* Nanak's* Sikh movement has been the Jat* peasantry. Today most followers of Kabir* are low-caste peasants and agricultural workers. On the other hand, the followers of Raidas* still come almost exclusively from the caste of leather workers (Chamars*) to which he belonged. They are numerous in both urban and rural areas. The present-day followers of Dadu* seem to come mostly from lower-middle-class groups with a relatively high rate of literacy (Thiel-Horstmann 1989, 141). Daniel Gold (1992, 33) claims that there occurred a general "gentrification of sant tradition" in the eighteenth

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century as more persons from merchant communities such as Palatu * became *nirguni** poets. Juergensmeyer's essay here shows how men from commercial castes have participated in the leadership of the Radhasoami movement. My own feeling is that while merchants such as Palatu* and Dharmadas* have played important roles in some *nirguni** sects, they never became a dominant influence in them, except perhaps in a few specific spiritual lineages. In any case, the more important fact is that Brahmin followers have been virtually nonexistent in all *nirguni** movements from the beginning until today.

The founders of most *saguni** devotional movements also seem to have come from more or less urban environments, but most were from Brahmin castes. The class and caste identities of the followers of *saguni** movements and sects, however, are extremely diverse. They include persons from a wide range of castes, from Brahmins to Sudras*, living in cities, towns and rural villages. Untouchables, however, are largely absent. Nonetheless, some Untouchables worship roughly the same gods at their own temples and shrines, a phenomenon that some anthropologists have described as a "replication" of more upper-caste religion (see Moffatt 1979; Lorenzen 1987a).

In some contexts, most notably in the Untouchable communities of South India studied by Michael Moffat and Louis Dumont, the use of this concept of replication may be partly justified. In the context of *nirguni** religion in North India, it is not. What *nirguni** religion does manifest, however, is a complex combination of borrowing from, imitation of, and rejection of the beliefs and practices of *saguni** religion. The essay of Uma Thukral in this book, for example, shows how some of the mostly Sudra* followers of Kabir* constructed a mythology of a series of avatar-like reincarnations of the non-anthropomorphic Satyapuru* that culminates in the incarnation of Kabir*, at the same time that these same followers rejected the standard avatars of Vishnu. Elsewhere (Lorenzen 1988), I have described how the Chauka* ritual of the Kabir* Panth borrows many elements from simple domestic rites such as the homonymous Chauka* and the Satya Narayana* Vrat, but transforms them into a public ritual of homage to the non-anthropomorphic Satya-purus*.

The most glaring theoretical weakness in Weber's analysis of the class affinities of religion is the lack of an adequate theory of ideology and the role it plays in determining the beliefs and practices of different religious movements. In this introduction I have attempted to offer

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some suggestions about the ways in which the articulation of social ideology and the formation of community identity have been key processes in the evolution and definition of *saguni* * and *nirguni** religious traditions in North India. The essays included in this book all discuss topics relevant to these issues. Although the topics of the essays are quite varied, each makes a significant contribution to the understanding of the development of these contrasting religious currents.

Notes

1. Marx and Engels develop this concept in *The Communist Manifesto* and in *The German Ideology*. It has been ably criticized in The *Dominant Ideology Thesis* by Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner (1984). On the concept of ideology in general, I have found John Thompson's *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (1984) to be quite useful.

2. Presumably Pandey would have much the same opinion of S. Pollock's (1993) more recent attempt to show that the cult of the avatar Ram* arose in large part as an expression of Hindu hostility to the conquest and rule of India by Muslim kings.

3. See also the valuable discussion of this and other aspects of communalism and religious conflict by Veena Das in her introduction to *Mirrors of Violence: Communities, Riots and Survivors in South Asia* (1990, 1-36).

4. For a recent discussion of the role of demography in the creation of social and political conflict, see Homer-Dixon et al. 1993. From a somewhat different point of view, the anthropologist Marvin Harris (1991) has also made a case for the role of demography in conflict creation.

5. See Hawley's essay in this volume for a more extended discussion of this point. See also the recent discussion by D. Gold (1992), who emphasizes both sorts of differences and also attempts to distinguish important ideological differences among poets *within* the *nirguni** tradition.

6. Madhava* 1915: chap. 14, 29-55. See Lorenzen 1983, 103.

7. *Bhagavata** *Purana**, 11.5.36 and 38. See also verses 12.3.51-52. See also the passages on the Kali Yuga from Tulasidas's* *Ramacharitamanas**, quoted by Lutgendorf in his essay here.

8. For bibliographic information about the hagiographies of all these sixteen saints and more, see my essay in this book.

9. The historians associated with the Annales school in France have produced important theoretical discussions of the ways in which the "popular" classes reinterpret and modify more upper-class culture, especially reli-

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gion, in the process of consuming and appropriating it (see especially Chattier 1984).

10. See also Marglin and Mishra 1991; Rao 1991. It is somewhat strange that the historians of the subaltem school of Indian history led by Ranajit Guha have largely steered clear of research on religious movements, although they have done considerable work on the origins of communalism. See, however, the articles by Amin (1988) and Dube (1992).

11. The first of these passages is from a modem collection of his *dohas* * (Tulasidas's* 1991, 160). It is probably taken from the *Vinaya-patrika**. In this *dohas** the terms used for "verses and songs" are *sakhi** and *sabadi**, both often used to refer to the verses of *nirguni** poets including Kabir*. It is likely that Tulas* is here alluding directly to Kabir*. The remaining two passages are from the *Ramacharitamanas** (Tulasidas* 1989, 985).

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PART I
COMMUNITY IDENTITY

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The Making of a Religious Paradox
Sikh, Khalsa *, Sahajdhari* as Modes of Early Sikh Identity

Harjot Oberoi

Otherwise we must all perish, for behind specific historical and cultural developments, East versus West, hierarchical versus egalitarian systems, individualism versus communism, lies the simple fact that man is both a structural and an anti-structural entity, who grows through antistructure and conserves through structure.
—Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields and Metaphors*

In official Sikh historiography it is commonplace to treat the rise, spread and consolidation of Sikhism as a single unitary whole. Such a narrative, like much else in academic discourse, seeks to dispel disturbing contradictions and synthesize Sikh experience in order to present it as a coherent whole, thus making the Sikh past, to use Nietzsche's illuminating term, "painless" for the minds of those who seek to live by it. A pseudosynthetic historiography comforts contemporary practitioners of faith that their present vision of the world and religious practices are simply a continuity of all that had been enunciated and established by the founders of the Sikh tradition. As a point of departure this essay questions this oversimplified linear growth model and argues for a series of highly complex ruptures, rapprochements and transitions that eventually resulted in what we today recognize as the modern Sikh religious community. In other words, prior to the formation of modern Sikhism in the late nineteenth century Sikh religious tradition traversed various modes of imagination and collective identity, some well known like the Khalsa* but others relatively more obscure like the Sahajdhari*. In what follows, I examine these various forms of Sikh identity and their historical articulation, hoping that in doing so we may also begin to notice and document similar processes in the formation and dissemination of other religious communities in the subcontinent.

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The dramatic political triumph of the Sikh movement in the second half of the eighteenth century gave the Sikhs a vast empire, but ironically the attainment of power and the process of state formation stalled the crystallization of a uniform Sikh identity. For much of its early history, the Sikh movement, in line with indigenous religious thinking and practices, with the exception of an understandable emphasis on the soteriological teachings of Guru * Nanak*, had shown little enthusiasm for distinguishing its constituents from members of other religious traditions and establishing a pan-Indian community. Sikh notions of time, space, corporeality, holiness, mythology, kinship, societal distinctions, purity and pollution, gender, sexuality and commensality were firmly rooted in Indic cultural thinking. The territories the Sikhs lived in, the languages they spoke, the agrarian festivals they participated in, the ritual personnel they patronized and the symbolic universe of their rites of passage, all these were shared by numerous others in the Punjab.

In this sense the history of Sikh tradition is radically different from say, early Christianity, which from the very beginning had a dominant concern with demarcating believers and nonbelievers. Within less then a century of its formation, Christian church leaders had begun to excommunicate those within the church who transgressed its systematic beliefs.[1] Such modes of exclusion and publicizing boundaries of belief and practices were quite alien to the history of early Sikh tradition. However, gradually the elusiveness of Sikh identity begins to disappear and in its place there surface some concrete identity markers under the Sikh Gurus*.[2] Guru* Nanak's* fundamental teaching had been that those who were keen on transcending the miseries that the constant cycle of birth and death entailed, should live in accordance with the Will of the Creator and spend their life on earth immersed in *nam** *simran** or remembrance of the Divine Name. In his paradigm of interior religiosity there was no need for austerities, penances, pilgrimages or formal worship at established religious centers like mosques or temples. Nanak's* successors, faced with a rapidly expanding constituency and changing social forces, found it hard to sustain his minimalist teachings. The initial Guru* period, following the death of Guru* Nanak*, provided significant axes of identity for the embryonic Sikh Panth: allegiance to the person of Guru* Nanak* and his nine successors; identification with their teachings *(bani**); the foundation of congregations

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(sangats *); the setting up of elaborate pilgrim centers at places like Goindwal and Amritsar; the convention of a communal meal *(langar**); and the compilation by Guru* Arjan of an anthology, commonly known as the *Adi* Granth,* that ultimately acquired the status of a sacred text of the Panth.

This last development took place in 1603-4 and was to have far reaching consequences for Sikh history. Although in our present state of research it is hard to specify the factors that may have prompted the fifth Guru* of the Sikhs to collate an anthology of devotional literature, it is easier to discuss its impact. The production of the *Adi* Granth* turned the Sikhs, in Brian Stock's conceptual terminology, into a "textual community,"[3] that is, a group of people whose social and religious activities are centered around a text, and who seek to order their everyday life in close correspondence to what the text actually prescribes or what they believe it lays down. For such a textual community to exist, it is not essential that everyone be familiar with the contents of the text, as long as there are a few literate persons who can convey to the rest an understanding of the text. Gradually those who are beyond the pale of the text begin to be viewed as outsiders, unable to attain the same level of spirituality as those who imbibed the teachings of the text. Such texts are particularly attractive to those groups "hitherto dependent on oral participation in religion."[4] There were many in the early Sikh movement who for the first time in their lives would be making a transition from an oral culture to the world of a written culture as embodied in the *Adi* Granth.* The popularity of the early Sikh Panth among the unlettered peasants of central Punjab may in part be explained by the existence of a written text. A voiceless sector of Punjabi society could now both interpret and express its life experience through a highly structured written text.

What then constituted Sikh identity during the early Guru* period? A revealing insight into what was demanded of a Sikh and what were the possible meanings of being Sikh in the initial phase is provided by the *vars** of Bhai* Gurdas* Bhalla* (c. 1558-1637), a nephew of the third Guru* Amar Das*, maternal uncle to Guru* Arian, and a close associate of several of the Sikh Gurus*. Well known for his role as a scribe and amanuensis of the *Adi* Granth,* he also wrote exegeses on the compositions of the Sikh Gurus*. There can hardly be a better source for understanding early Sikh identity than the compositions of Bhai* Gurdas*

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written in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. [5] According to them, it was required that a Sikh should rise before dawn, bathe, and recite the sacred compositions of the Sikh masters. In the early hours of the morning a Sikh should visit a *dharamsala**, the place used for congregational singing and prayer in the locality, and participate in the activities of the assembled *sangat**. Bhai* Gurdas* advised the faithful to be humble, courteous and charitable, to eat, speak and sleep in moderation, and, in doing so to transcend the human ego. Unrestrained human energies and chaotic living can lead to sorrow and pain. The ideal way to overcome these afflictions and lead a harmonious life is to practice the precepts of the Gurus*.[6] There are no explicit statements on an independent Sikh identity, but some of the most enduring themes in Sikh consciousness are enunciated: the centrality of belief and abiding faith in the person and utterances of the Sikh Gurus*; the need to visit *the dharamsala**, and the repeated emphasis on the *sangat** as a body of practitioners in faith. Bhai* Gurdas* is not completely unaware of boundaries. Frequently in his verse he belabors the point that Muslims are missing the correct path, and Hindus are caught in the snare of empty rituals and social inequalities.[7] The solution for him is a Sikh way of life, a distinctive third path to resolve human problems, and the ideal man is a *gurmukh,* a follower of the Sikh Gurus* and their doctrines.[8] These are not merely metaphysical differences but suggest a new *idiom,* a separate community of believers, and above all a reworking of the social order.

The implicit nature of Sikh identity in the writings of Bhai* Gurdas* becomes explicit with the emergence and dissemination of the voluminous *janam-sakhi** literature. *Janam-sakhi* is the name given to mythical life narratives of Guru* Nanak*. Although the earliest extant manuscript of this hagiographic tradition can only be dated back to 1658 C.E., it is quite clear from much recent research that these traditional story cycles in their written form go back to the early seventeenth century, and in their oral form they began to circulate as soon as the fame of Guru* Nanak* spread by word of mouth in the Punjab.[9] The mythical narratives in the *janam-sakhis*, while instructing and entertaining the faithful with wonder stories from an imagined life of Guru* Nanak*, also simultaneously express the state of the Sikh Panth in the seventeenth century. One oft he early anecdotes in the *janam-sakhi* tradition tells how Nanak* was commissioned by God to launch his own distinct religious community in the world:[10]

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"Go, Nanak *," [answered God]. "Your *panth* will flourish. The salutation of your followers shall be: 'In the name of the true Guru*, I fall at your feet.' The salutation of the Vaisnava* Panth is: 'In the name of Rama* and Krishna.' The salutation of the Sannyasi* Panth is: 'In the name of Narayan*, I bow before you.' The yogis' salutation is: 'Hail to the primal One.' The Muslims' cry is: 'In the name of the One God, peace be with you.' You are Nanak* and your panth will flourish. Your followers shall be called Nanak-panthis* and their salutation will be: 'In the name of the true Guru*, I fall at your feet.' I shall bless your panth. Inculcate devotion towards Me and strengthen men's obedience to their dharma. As the Vaisnavas* have their temple, the yogis their *asan*, and the Muslims their mosque, so your followers shall have their dharamsala*. Three things you must inculcate in your panth: repeating the divine Name, giving charity, and regular bathing. Keep yourself unspotted while yet remaining a householder."

Outside this particular anecdote that identifies the Sikh *dharamsala** and salutations as key markers of communal self-identification, the very vigor and proliferation of this mythological form attests to the growing assertion of Sikh Panth. This hagiographic genre would obviously have not grown enormously during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries if there were not a growing awareness of issues of identity.

Having said all this, it must be stated categorically that Sikhs were still in the process of evolution and growth. The category, Sikh, was still flexible, problematic, and substantially empty: a long historical intervention was needed before it was saturated with signifiers, icons and narratives and made to lose its early fluidity. There was still critical space at the center and periphery of the community that had not been appropriated and shaded in with the colors of a dominant religious ideology. At best, the conventions developed during the early Guru* period epitomized what linguists term "denotation." In other words, the label Sikh, designated a section of the population, but this group did not as yet possess a "connotation," a corpus of identical secondary meanings.[11] Even the label Sikh had as yet not become hegemonic. Various categories were used by contemporaries to express an association with the Sikh movement: Nanak-panth*, Gurmukh-panth, Nirmal-panth, Gur-sikh and Gurmukh-marg*. While the first term was related to the person of Guru* Nanak*, the rest were drawn

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from his key doctrines. The multiplicitous terminology is a significant reflection of the evolving and unfixed nature of early Sikh identity. Eventually when Sikh identity became standardized all these terms were marginalized: for it is not possible to express a highly uniform consciousness through a plethora of categories.

While protagonists of modem Sikh identity would like to see in the collation of the *Adi * Granth* in 1603-4 under Guru* Arjan, a powerful public declaration of the separation of the Sikh Panth from other religious traditions, historically it is difficult to admit such an interpretation. It was not at all uncommon in medieval India to compile anthologies of devotional literature called *gutkas** or *pothis*.*[12] Their compilers and readers did not perceive them essentially to be statements of sectarian intent. While the *Adi* Granth* is the most voluminous and structured of the early-seventeenth-century devotional anthologies, features that may be explained by the institutional successes of the Sikh movement and its growing secular resources, it certainly was neither the first nor the last such collection. In this context the history of the Fatehpur manuscript, virtually unknown in the area of Sikh studies, is most instructive.[13] This anthology of devotional poetry was compiled in Rajasthan twenty-one years prior to the *Adi* Granth.* Although the bulk of it is made up of the compositions of the saint-poet Surdas*, it also contains the works of thirty-five other poets, including such well-known names as Kabir*, Namdev*, Ravidas*, Parmanand* and Kanha*. The *Adi* Granth* shares many features with the Fatehpur manuscript. Like the Fatehpur manuscript, the *Adi* Granth,* besides containing the writings of the Sikh Gurus*, also incorporates the song-verses of twenty-nine other mystics and poets including Surdas*, Kabir*, Namdev*, Ravidas* and Parmanand*. Both collections similarly draw on the works of people from a wide range of social backgrounds ranging from Brahmins to Untouchables, and also note the *ragas** in which the verses should be sung. While there is no denying the fact that the *Adi* Granth* today has become a key cultural marker of Sikh ethnicity, it would be a gross misinterpretation to view it in the same vein for the early seventeenth century. Its heterodox textuality and diverse contributors were more a manifestation of the fluidity of Sikh identity rather than a signifier of exclusivity. If our objective is to understand the complex nature of the making of the modem Sikh identity, it will not do to mix contemporary Sikh understandings and practices with past patterns. Critically disaggregating the two and locating the precise period of

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their origins will certainly provide us with a much better feel for the evolution of the Sikh Panth.

The same fluidity and imprint of prevalent traditions that characterizes the *Adi * Granth* is also to be noticed, in fact in a much more amplified form, in the *janam-sakhis** narrating the life, travels, and teachings of Guru* Nanak*. When in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries these mythical texts first came to be recorded in manuscripts, based on a substantial body of oral anecdotes, the mythologists freely borrowed from the rich storehouse of Puranic stories, Sufi hagiographies called *tazkiras* and Buddhist *jataka** tales. Deploying other peoples' myths is, of course, a poor strategy for those who seek to stake out a bounded religious territory. As a consequence, there is no fixity to Nanak's* image in the *janam-sakhi** stories: much like Puranic gods and goddesses, he is always being transformed. In one myth he is represented as an ascetic who lives on sand, in another he becomes a householder who toils for a living. One set of stories transport him to Mecca and another set take him to Hardwar. The Nanak* of the *janam-sakhis* is a saint who delights in mixing his dress code by making his own the styles of Muslim *pirs** and Hindu ascetics, chooses companions and disciples whose castes and religions do not match and in his social transactions pays no heed to spatial and dietary religious taboos. It is perhaps to keep pace with this kaleidoscopic persona that mythologists, besides calling him Guru, refer to him by various other religious titles: *pir*, sadh*, bhagat, faqir* and darves*.*[14] The underlying logic behind these varied terms of address was to convey the ever transforming personality of *Nanak**.

Subject to their own historical conditions, Sikh mythmakers of the seventeenth century obviously had no compulsions to disengage themselves from their symbolic universe and concentrate on generating one single image of Nanak*. A narrative tradition that represents an image of Nanak* in constant flux also had manifold ramifications for early Sikh identity. Just as there is no fixed Guru* Nanak* in the *janam-sakhis*, similarly there was no fixed Sikh identity in the early Guru* period. Mythologists, after all, draw their materials and inspiration from the society they live in. One major impulse in the writing of the *janam-sakhis* was that seventeenth-century Sikhs would cast their lives in the image of Nanak*. But the converse is equally true. Guru* Nanak's* mythical life was in part fashioned after the universe of seventeenth-century Sikhs.

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It was a universe that was free of fixed identities. If the overall objective of the *janam-sakhi* * mythologists is to be construed as the construction of an autonomous Sikh worldview they could not possibly have done a worse job. One *janam-sakhi* episode relates the story of a highly impoverished Sikh who in his efforts to buy food for Guru* Nanak* and his companion simply cuts and sells his long hair.[15]. Cutting bodily hair was to become one of the central Sikh taboos in the eighteenth century.

Those who argue for a distinct Sikh worldview, right from the initial Guru* period, often quote the following verse of Guru* Arjan:[16]

> I neither keep the Hindu fasts nor the Muslim Ramadan.
> I serve him alone who in the end will save me.
> My Master is both the Muslim Allah and the Hindu Gosain*,
> And thus have I finished the dispute between the Hindu and the Muslim.
> I do not go on pilgrimage to Mecca.
> Nor bathe at the Hindu holy places.
> I serve the one Master, and none beside Him;
> Neither performing the Hindu worship nor offering Muslim prayer,
> To the formless One I bow in my heart,
> I am neither Hindu nor Muslim.

Taking the last line as the key to this hymn, many have argued that Guru* Arian is proclaiming that Sikhs are neither Hindus nor Muslims and therefore are a distinct religious community.[17] There are several textual problems with this reasoning. As pointed out by Sahib Singh, the most eminent Sikh exegete of this century, Guru* Arian wrote this hymn in a definite context: he was reflexively responding to an older verse by the poet-singer Kabir*, included in the *Adi** *Granth*:[18]

> I have no disputes,
> For I have renounced the path of both the pandit* and the mullah.
> I weave and weave, to make my own way,
> And I sing of the Supreme Being to empty the self.
> All the codes inscribed by the padit* and the mullah,
> Those I absolutely renounce and will not imbibe.
> Those pure of heart shall find the Supreme Being within,
> Kabir* says, in knowing the self, one realizes the Supreme Being.

Guru* Arian in his exegetical verse cited earlier is thus only further enforcing Kabir's* thought. In line with a dominant theme in medieval

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sant poetics, both Kabir * and Arjan are speaking of rejecting the received Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies, not taking part in their formal modes of worship and pilgrimage, and finally announcing that the mystery of the Supreme Being is to be resolved in one's heart. It is oversimplistic to suggest that they are discounting one set of categories to embrace a new set of labels.

For the unwary, the quest for early Sikh identity can be full of pitfalls. Traditional Indian thought has always spoken eloquently of the impermanence of the world and human endeavors. Sikh Gurus* gave further credence to this very same idea in their vernacular poetry. This belief in the ephemeral nature of the universe has influenced not only the construction of personhood in South Asia, but as Wendy Doniger O'Flaherty has recently shown, also has pervaded its art and literature.[19] In such a cultural milieu, as even the Greeks, Muslims and Europeans who came to India were to realize, it was always difficult for any people to stay apart, and articulate permanent separate identities. But as the initial Guru* period comes to a sudden end with the execution of Guru* Arjan in 1606, the Sikh movement begins to show signs of partly moving beyond existing cultural traditions. A continuous Jat* influx into the Sikh movement throughout the seventeenth century and a protracted conflict with an increasingly hostile Mughal state, gradually gave rise to new Sikh cultural patterns.[20]

The Sikhs, to borrow a formulation of Michel Foucault, were faced with a "historical rupture." In the last decade of the seventeenth century, in the month of Baisakh, the last Sikh Guru*, Gobind Singh, instituted the Khalsa* order. Due to the paucity of written records, it is hard to specify why the Khalsa* order was established and it is even harder to specify the exact nature of the Khalsa* under Gobind Singh. But one thing is clear, the Khalsa* was instituted to finally end the ambiguities of Sikh religiosity. The Sikhs would henceforth, at least normatively, be able to distinguish between "us" and "others." These distinctions were inscribed through a highly complex cultural repertoire made up of inventive rituals, codes of conduct, mythical narratives and a whole new classificatory code of the body.

The first major signifier of the changing alignments and orientations within the Sikh movement came when the old term *sikh,* derived from the Sanskrit word *sisya** meaning disciple, came to be neglected and a new category, *khalsa**, came to the fore. Although in its popular usage today, the term *khalsa**, derived from the Arabic-Persian *khalis**,

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is seen to signify "pure," in the seventeenth century it was used by the Mughal bureaucracy as part of its revenue lexicon for lands that were trader the direct supervision of the Crown. [21] The earlier Sikh Gurus* had appointed officials known as *masands** to take care of rapidly expanding Sikh congregations across northern India. But Gobind Singh decided that these vicarlike officers had turned corrupt and he did away with the institution of *masands**. In abolishing the authority of the *masands** and their status as intermediaries, the Guru* decided to bring all the Sikh congregations directly under his own supervision. Just as the Mughal emperors directly supervised Crown lands *(khalis**), Gobind Singh, following the imperial revenue paradigm, undertook to establish a direct contact with his constituents without what was perceived to be a debilitating mediation on the part of the *masands**. His reservations about the *masands** become explicit when he writes:[22]

> If any one serve the *masands**, they will say "Fetch and give us all thine offerings. Go at once and make a present of whatever property is in thy house. Think on us night and day, and mention not others even by mistake." If they hear of anyone giving, they run to him even at night, they are not at all pleased at not receiving. They put oil into their eyes to make people believe that they are shedding tears. If they see any of their own worshippers wealthy, they serve up sacred food and feed him with it. If they see him without wealth, they give him nothing, though he beg for it; they will not even show him their faces. *Those beasts plunder men, and never sing the praises of the Supreme Being.*

Towards the close of the seventeenth century Guru* Gobind Singh in his *hukam-namas** (decrees) repeatedly asks Sikh *sangats** across northern India to disassociate themselves from the *masands**.[23] In addition, he instructs the Khalsa* to maintain unshorn hair and also never to shave facial hair.[24] By the turn of the seventeenth century, the Khalsa* was much more than a semantic category analogous to imperial revenue terminology: he was a new person with a concrete identity. His personhood came to be confirmed through an unusual initiation rite called *khande* ki* pahul**, the like of which had never existed before in South Asia. Most religious sects in the past had initiated their fresh constituents, and this appears to be the case with the Sikh tradition as well, through *charn amrit:* a ritual in which the toe of a guru was

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dipped into water that was then given to the new initiate to drink. Although we have no contemporary description of *khande * ki* pahul*, this much is certain, that it involved the use of a heavy double-edged sword and sanctified water. Whatever its precise form and sequence, this new initiation ritual and its distinctive religious imagery, gave the Khalsa* a powerful symbolic grid on which to proclaim and affirm their new identity. To this new identity Gobind Singh gave further shape by commanding the Khalsa* always to carry arms on his person, and by making hookah-smoking taboo.[25]

Sainapati, a court poet of Gobind Singh and his first biographer, suggests that it was the wish of Gobind Singh that all Sikhs turn Khalsa*. There were spiritual incentives for turning Khalsa*. In the initial Guru* period, the principal mode to attain deliverance from the miseries of the transmigratory cycle was *nam* simran**. Under Gobind Singh this goal could be attained by initiation into the Khalsa*. The Khalsa* now becomes "the institution of redemption."[26] A new theology comes to inform older Sikh institutions and concepts. The Sikh *sangat**, in Sainapati's view, is to be made up exclusively of the Khalsa*. Similarly, only those who choose to identify with the Khalsa* are *gurmukh*s, the rest are all *manmukh*s. Clearly the ideal Sikh is the Khalsa*. Acceptance of Khalsa* identity thus became a major yardstick to gauge an individual Sikh's loyalty to the Guru*. Those who were disloyal to the Guru* were susceptible to a series of dangers, including the possibility of never attaining salvation and turning up in hell. Despite the considerable incentives and fear of future accountability for those who did not become Khalsa*, not all Sikhs became Khalsa*. For instance, we know that some of Gobind Singh's closest disciples did not undergo the Khalsa* initiation. Sainapati himself describes at length how in the capital city of Delhi a large number of Sikhs from the Brahmin and Khatri* castes strongly resisted the Khalsa* identity. Fearful of becoming marginalized, and wanting to stick to the customary cultural codes of their own lineages and castes, they turned their wrath against their co-religionists who had become Khalsa*. The new Khalsa* were harassed, their shops were shut down, and an economic boycott imposed on them. In seeking to turn the fluid world of Indic religious identities upside down, the Khalsa* from the very beginning found it rough going. Sainapati hints at this when he writes: "On one side stands the Khalsa* and on the other the world."[27]

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Boundaries and Transgression

While the paucity of sources alluded to earlier prevents a Geertzian "thick description," of the people who came to constitute the Khalsa *, it is still possible to delineate the categories of thought, symbolic grids, ritual practices, in brief, the cultural systems of reference that came into prominence following the Khalsa* "transformation." The Sikh movement now increasingly turned inward and became preoccupied with securing religious boundaries and distancing all those who were unwilling to accept these new boundaries. Just as in traditional Indian thought each varna* is supposed to perform its dharma or moral duty, the Khalsa* brought forth its own dharma. They gave it their own distinctive name: *rahit.* Texts which list these moral duties accordingly came to be known as *rahit-namas*.* These codes of conduct cover all domains of human life ranging from such routine matters as how the Khalsa* shall eat to laying down the nature of piety. In what follows I use the *rahit-namas** literature and allied texts to describe the production and reproduction of Khalsa* cultural identity during the first three quarters of the eighteenth century. In tracing the distinctive Khalsa* conception of the self, particular attention has been given to five interrelated themes: life-cycle rituals, tabooed behavior, the dynamics of transgression, the constitution of sacred space, and the makeup of the Other. The need for stating the rich cultural universe of the Khalsa* has become all the more pressing because there are many who, based on their reading of English language sources such as census reports and army recruitment manuals, have begun to theorize that the Khalsa* identity only became dominant in the late nineteenth century under British sponsorship.

Rituals constitute a key element in the construction of religious identity, particularly those that fall under the rubric of rites of passage. In all pre-industrial societies such rites tend to express the relationships between individuals and the society in which they live. Prior to the Khalsa* transformation, Sikhs do not seem to have possessed a distinct set of life-cycle rituals. Given the fluid nature of Sikh identity, there was of course no need for such rituals. But in the eighteenth century the Khalsa* Sikhs become keenly aware of the absence of distinct life-cycle rituals and took urgent steps to rectify the situation by introducing new rites, particularly to mark a person's birth, initiation and death.[28]

Soon after birth a child was to undergo his first initiation by being administered an initiatory drink made up of sweetened water touched

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by the feet of five Sikhs. His hair was to be left uncut and the newborn baby was to be given a name from the *Adi * Granth.* On the completion of the naming ceremony, the child was to be bathed in curds. There is an unmistakable quest for an exclusive Sikh identity in these postnatal rituals. I shall have more to say on the import of rituals later in this essay.

The next step, perhaps the most crucial stage, in the construction of an autonomous Khalsa* identity was the initiation rite popularly known as *khande* ki* pahul*.* The then accepted time for baptism was early teens, a period before a Sikh's hair had grown to its full length. The initiation ritual was presided over by five devout Sikhs who were recognized for their wisdom and who had been scrupulous in the observance of *rahit.* They were the ones who prepared the sanctified water for initiation by mixing water and sugar confectionary and stirring the preparation with a double-edged sword. All this was done to the recitation of five quatrains from the writings of Guru* Gobind Singh. Once the sanctified water was ready the neophyte was given it five times to drink, and five times it was sprinkled on his eyes and five times on his head. The initiated Sikh then declared: *"Vahiguru* ji* ka* Khalsa*! Vahiguru* ji* ki* fateh!"* ("Hail to the Guru's* Khalsa*! Hail the victory of the Guru*!"). The final part of baptism consisted of the initiate being instructed in *rahit,* particularly his obligation to bear arms and leave his hair uncut.[29]

In the evolution of different religious communities, marriage rituals have often proven useful to express a sense of collective identity. In the eighteenth century, Khalsa* Sikhs certainly sensed the powerful potential of marriage rituals to convey separate identity, but seem to have failed in fully harnessing these rituals to their cause. Although the paucity of sources makes it difficult to make a definitive statement on the nature of Khalsa* marriage rituals, all available evidence seems to indicate that the sequence of a Khalsa* wedding mainly followed old caste and lineage customs prevalent among various sectors of Punjabi society: the bridegroom's marriage procession going to the bride's house after sunset, the performance of numerous wedding rituals under the supervision of Nais* and Brahmins, and finally the couple to be wed circumambulating the fire, which, as a deity, stood witness to the marriage.[30] The early *rahit-namas** certainly do not seem to abolish the age-old marriage practices based on lineage and caste rules, except for a caveat that restricted the choice of bridegrooms to Sikhs alone. The

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only way a non-Sikh bridegroom was acceptable was if he agreed to undergo an initiation. [31]

The final set of rituals that Khalsa* Sikhs appropriated in the eighteenth century were mortuary rituals. The *rahit-nams** sternly dictated that a death in the family was not to be followed by public lamentations.[32] The body of the deceased was to be washed and the head was to be left unshaved. During the period of mourning, there was to be a complete reading of the *Adi** *Granth,* singing of *kirtan** and distribution of charitable offerings. A key rite was slowly being suffused with Khalsa* doctrines and symbols.

What are the conceptual implications of these newly instituted rites of passage? Ritual enactments are a condensed statement of the most deeply held values of a society. As metaphors of collective consciousness they distinguish between outsiders and insiders by erecting religious boundaries, communicate spatial and temporal notions and endow people with a significant sense of personal identity. The symbols, gestures, formulae and emotions that make up a ritual performance help transform the chaos and vicissitudes of human existence into an ordered and meaningful sequence. More simply put, rituals help people overcome indeterminacy in life, endowing social life with a certainty which it does not otherwise possess.[33] In this sense the Khalsa* life-crisis rituals were useful not only in persuading others in the Punjab of the distinct nature of Sikh identity, but also in helping the Khalsa* Sikhs to face the unsettled and chaotic conditions of eighteenth-century Punjab, following the decline of the Mughal state and incessant Afghan invasions. The stereotyped, highly repetitive and stylized form of rituals helped generate a sense of orderliness and security among the otherwise highly disordered and dispersed Khalsa*. It is worth noting that the meaning of the term *samskar**, widely used in lay parlance to denote life-cycle rituals, is to "prepare," "refine" and "complete."[34] In other words these rituals (*samskars**) have a transformative power that distills and completes what is undistilled and incomplete in human life.

The Khalsa* rituals at birth, initiation and death were to gradually turn the highly undistilled and fluid Sikh identity into a more distilled and enduring form. For instance, the various steps in Khalsa* initiation ritual, the liminal state of an individual before being initiated, the separation of the neophyte from the rest on the occasion of baptism, the preparation of sanctified water, the readings from Sikh scriptures and

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instructions for future behavior, all these endowed an individual with a new, bounded identity, one that he would only share with others who had been initiated in the same mode and were committed to follow the specific *rahit* code of conduct. The ritual of baptism therefore made it possible for the Khalsa * Sikhs to think and act in terms of "us" and "them." Prior to the establishment of this ritual, it had been difficult for Sikhs to demarcate themselves from the rest of civil society. Now they came to establish far more secure communal boundaries.

But the boundaries established by the rites of passage were not sufficient. They were supplemented in the *rahit-namas** by a long inventory of tabooed behavior. To qualify for Khalsa* Sikh identity an individual had to refrain from certain actions and behavior that may be permitted to others in Punjabi society. The most famous of these tabooed actions was the injunction against shaving hair. Other lesser known actions that were barred consisted of bathing at a spot where washermen washed clothes, sleeping or bathing naked, plucking white hairs, having sexual intercourse with a Muslim woman, speaking while defecating, eating food left by a woman, accepting the authority of a Muslim religious figure, offering prayers at a tomb or a cenotaph and undertaking a visit to a Hindu temple or a Muslim mosque.

While it is possible to find symbolic, religious, or pragmatic reasons for some of these injunctions, they cannot all be fully explained. For instance, the prohibition against consuming the leftovers of a woman can be understood as a precaution against pollution, and the varied injunctions against visiting non-Khalsa* religious places was to give shape to distinctive sacred boundaries. But it is not possible to explain each and every item of the vast list of tabooed behavior. It is difficult to understand the ban on speech while a person was defecating. Despite such gray areas, for our purposes what needs to be underscored is that the *rahit-namas** literature by prohibiting a section of society from performing certain actions, helped distinguish Khalsa* Sikhs from the rest of Punjabi society.

It is hard to sustain separate religious identity without distinctive sacred space. Khalsa* Sikhs in the eighteenth century showed deep awareness of this fact. They established firm control over the central shrine in Amritsar and turned it into a major site of pilgrimage. The duties of the Khalsa* Sikhs in relation to sacred space and its management were clearly enunciated in the *rahit-namas**.[35] Wherever Khalsa* Sikhs resided they were expected to set up a *dharamsala** and assemble

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there regularly to read and sing from scriptures. On entering a *dharamsala* * a Khalsa* Sikh was required to prostrate and make offerings of flowers, fruit or money. There was to be no talking while the scriptures were being read or sung. The person in charge of the *dharamsala** was to be highly virtuous, celibate and knowledgeable in the scriptures. It was his duty to conduct worship, officiate at religious rituals, and instruct the Khalsa* boys in the locality in the contents of the *Adi** *Granth* and reading and singing from it.

Khalsa* Sikhs in their quest for an exclusive identity and distinct religious boundaries were further assisted by state polity in eighteenth-century North India. In seeking to usurp power from a predominantly Muslim administration, Khalsa* Sikhs began to view all Muslims with hostility and suspicion. One mid-eighteenth-century *rahit-nama** laid down extensive injunctions against social, cultural or religious contact with Muslims.[36] A moratorium was placed on Khalsa* Sikhs' accepting water from a Muslim, eating food offered by a Muslim, or sleeping in their company. In disassociating from the Muslims, Khalsa* Sikhs enhanced their sense of separateness and the category Muslim became a powerful signifier of Otherness. Besides Muslims, there were at least twelve other groups with whom the Khalsa* Sikhs were to have no contact. Most notable among these reprobate groups were all those who had dared challenge the orthodox line of succession of ten Sikh Gurus*.[37] But it also included others like ascetics who wear caps, naked sadhus who coat themselves with ashes, mendicants who mat their hair, those who shave their heads and those who do not wear turbans.[38] By creating Khalsa* identity in opposition to certain groups, a firm distinction could be fostered between "us" and "them."

From the above consideration of Khalsa* rites of passage, tabooed behavior, the nature of sacred space and the formation of Others, it is possible to conclude that by the second half of the eighteenth century a distinctive Khalsa* normative order had emerged. A considerable distance had to be traversed from being non-Khalsa* to a Khalsa* Sikh and those who covered this distance in terms of doctrines, rituals, discourses of the body, management of space and negation of various prevalent religious and cultural identities could look upon themselves as a distinct religious formation. Contemporary records—accounts by early Europeans, Persian chronicles and Sikh hagiographic literature—all point towards Khalsa* identity gradually becoming hegemonic within Sikh tradition.

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